



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## A NOTE ON KLEIST'S *PRINZ VON HOMBURG*

In Kleist's *Prinz von Homburg* the hero, an impetuous young cavalry officer, is charged with disobedience to military orders. Though a prince, he is court-martialed for this breach of discipline and, despite the further fact that the military action in question was crowned by victory, he is pronounced guilty as charged and sentenced to death. The self-centered nature and defiantly individualistic attitude of the young man now, in the hours of deepest humiliation, undergo a profound change; his former irresponsible haughtiness gives way to a broader, social view of disciplined patriotism. It is the chastening experience within prison walls which effects his spiritual regeneration, and the absolute change thus wrought in his soul is dramatically revealed when the elector's letter suddenly throws upon him the tremendous moral responsibility of judging his own case. Under this unexpected appeal to his innermost being the young officer superbly rises to the full stature of his manliness. Sincerely and profoundly regretting his personal insubordination and eager to atone for his gravely irresponsible conduct, he fervently desires that he be sacrificed to the larger principle of eternal law and order as he now sees it. Only in view of this complete transformation does the elector then order, not only the revocation of the death sentence, but also the pardon of the prince.

The relation between Kleist's much discussed motif and a strikingly similar episode in Livy (VIII, 30-35) has been dealt with in detail by Johannes Niejahr.<sup>1</sup> Professor Nollen, in his scholarly edition of the *Prinz von Homburg*, epitomizes Livy's account in the following passage: "In the second Samnite war the master of the horse, Q. Fabius, 'a high-spirited youth,' contrary to the explicit orders of the dictator, L. Papirius, attacked the enemy at a favorable moment, and with a desperate cavalry charge put them to flight. Papirius, enraged at such a flagrant breach of discipline, and still more at the young man's persistence in stubborn defiance of his authority, summarily con-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. his article *Ein Livianisches Motiv in Kleist's Prinz von Homburg* in *Euphorion* IV, 61.

demned him to death, and turned a deaf ear to the entreaties of the whole army, and even of the senate, when they pleaded for mercy. Only when Fabius himself fell at the dictator's feet with a humble confession of his guilt, when 'military discipline and the majesty of government had prevailed' and the defiant pride of the young officer had been broken, did Papirius grant the life of Fabius 'as a boon to the Roman people,' amid universal applause."

I have ventured to recall these two parallel episodes for the reason that they were brought back vividly to my mind by the following brief historical account of the stern working of military law in Thomas Fuller's *The Holy State and the Profane State*, the first edition of which appeared in 1642. In the passage in question, Fuller relates the interesting and touching fate of "the French soldier in Scotland, some eighty years since,<sup>2</sup> who first mounted the bulwark of a fort besieged, whereupon ensued the gaining of the fort: but Marescal de Thermes, the French general, first knighted him and then hanged him within an hour after, because he had done without commandment." I do not recall having seen any reference to this incident in connection with Kleist's play; to forestall a possible misapprehension, however, I ought to add that I am taking this occasion to draw attention to it solely because of the features which are common both to Kleist's motif and the historical episode. Whether there is reason to suspect any influence, direct or indirect, in the matter, I am not prepared to say; in view of the very much closer Livian account, however, I confess I am inclined to doubt it.

I feel moved to point out, in an English work of fiction, another scene whereof certain features naturally provoke a comparison with at least one phase of the painful experience of Kleist's hero. I have in mind the scene in Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth* in which the young Highland chief, Conachar, at the mere thought of an impending battle, betrays an abject cowardice—a situation reminding one of the unconventional scene in Kleist's drama where we see the young officer, the undaunted hero of more than one battle, so completely un-

<sup>2</sup> This would fix the date of the incident at about 1560, at which time there were French soldiers in Scotland. I found no mention of the particular episode in the historical works which were accessible to me.

manned by the harrowing sight of his own grave as to be reduced to a state of groveling helplessness—an ordeal which he undergoes while still a prisoner and prior to his regeneration. Since the *Fair Maid of Perth* is one of Scott's least popular novels, it may be desirable to present the arresting episode somewhat fully.

In a scene well-nigh as bold as Kleist's, Scott introduces the reader to old Simon Glover's hut. "Two hours before the black-cock crew," we read, "Simon Glover was awakened by a well-known voice, which called him by name." When he raised his eyes he saw standing before him not "the mail-clad Highland chief, with claymore [a heavy two-handed broadsword] in hand, as he had seen him the preceding night, but Conachar of Curfew Street, in his humble apprentice's garb, holding in his hand a switch of oak" and carrying "a piece of lighted bog-wood . . . in a lantern."

The young chief who comes at this unusual hour to press old Simon to bestow upon him his daughter Catharine, finally, despite his ardent suit, receives the unequivocal and disheartening answer, "With my consent my daughter shall never wed save in her own degree," whereupon he exclaims in despair, "Farewell the only hope which would have lighted me to fame or victory." And shortly after he adds, "I am about to tell you a secret . . . the deepest and dearest secret that man ever confided to man." This he does not reveal at once, however. Instead, by way of preparing the way for his intimate disclosure, he asks, "In this age of battle, father, you have yourself been a combatant?" A brief question indeed, but quite sufficient to induce old Simon to relate at some length the war-like experience of his earlier years. In the course of his narrative he frankly confesses that he seldom slept worse than the night before the expected onslaught which he describes. In the morning the warriors were summoned to their places by the ringing of a bell. Of the tolling of that bell he says, "I never heard its sound peal so like a passing knell before or since." Nevertheless the "cold fit" and the "strange breathlessness" which he experienced, together with a "desire to go home for a glass of distilled waters" when he saw the enemy "marching forward to the attack in strong columns," soon gave way to composure and

self-control, and during the actual conflict, as he declares, his conduct even "gained some credit."

At this point of the old man's recital the imagination of the young Highland chief, stirred to feverish excitement, conjures up the horrors of an impending fray between two powerful clans which is to settle a mountain-feud of long standing—a conflict in which he will be compelled to participate. And under the spell of his vivid mental picture he suddenly utters the startling confession, "Father, I am a Coward!" Then launching forth upon a description of the "demoniac fury" of the bloody fray as he conceives it, he speaks as follows, "Blows clang, and blood flows, thicker, faster, redder; they rush on each other like madmen, they tear each other like wild beasts; the wounded trodden to death amid the feet of their companions! Blood ebbs, arms become weak; but there must be no parley, no truce, no interruption, while any of the maimed wretches remain alive! Here is no crouching behind battlements, no fighting with missile weapons: all is hand to hand, till hands can no longer be raised to maintain the ghastly conflict! If such a field is so horrible in idea, what think you it will be in reality?" How vividly all this reminds one of the piteous outburst of Kleist's unnerved hero after he has caught a glimpse of his own open grave. Constitutionally weak of nerve, the young Scotch chief feels that with one blow all support has been knocked out from under him, for in his ardent suit for Simon Glover's daughter he has failed; we now see him in a state of moral helplessness well-nigh as abject as that of the young imprisoned officer under sentence of death in the *Prinz von Homburg*.

Scott did not intend in his novel, any more than did Kleist in his drama, that his young hero should by his betrayal of fear forfeit our sympathy; nor, indeed, does he, and least of all when he exclaims, "Were Catharine to look kindly on the earnest love I bear her, it would carry me against the front of the enemies with the mettle of a war-horse. Overwhelming as my sense of weakness is, the feeling that Catharine looked on would give me strength. Say yet—oh, say yet—she shall be mine if we gain the combat, and not the Gow Chrom himself, whose heart is of a piece with his anvil, ever went to battle so light as I shall do! One strong passion is conquered by another."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In Kleist's play it is the hero who finally, in the hour of supreme trial,

Though the characters about which Scott wove his novel are admittedly fictitious, we know from his own statement that in his story he utilized features of an episode which he found ready to hand in a historical record dealing with a "barrier-battle" and chronicling even "the flight of one of the appointed champions." Perhaps there is no reason, therefore, to suspect any further literary influence here, even in the way of suggestion, despite the fact that both in Kleist's play (published in 1821) and in Scott's novel (1828) the particular feature under consideration is virtually the same, namely, an exhibition of cowardice in an author's male character, and despite the further fact that Scott not only admired German literature but even prepared and published some translations from German authors. Still, in any case, we have before us two interesting examples of an unusual theme in literature which, for purposes of comparison, it seemed desirable to bring together within the same field of vision.

C. H. IBERSHOFF

*University of Iowa*

---

sustains the woman, and not vice versa—a situation quite in keeping with the poet's characteristic conception of the ideal woman.